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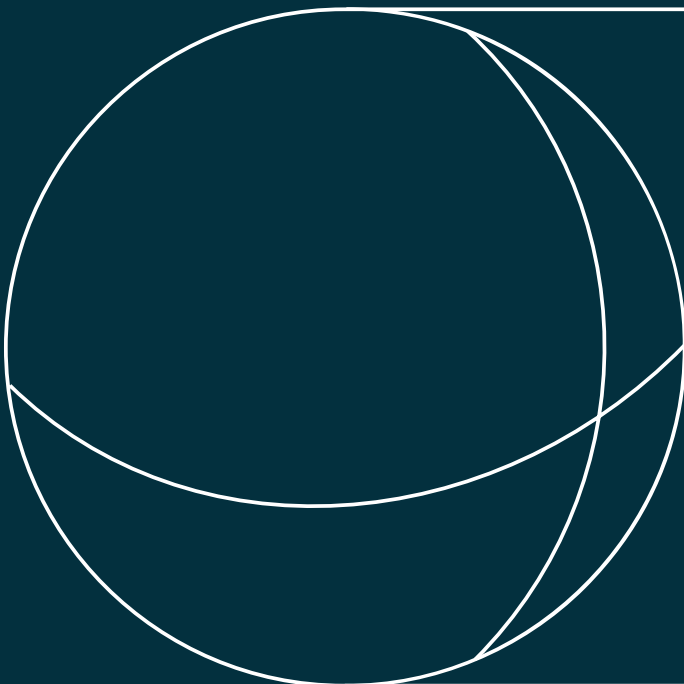
Actorness in Different Shades?
Comparing EU External Action Across Global Governance Institutions

Lead authors: Franziska Petri (KU Leuven), Steven Blockmans (CEPS), Edith Drieskens (KU Leuven), and Ceren Ergenc (CEPS)

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Abstract

This report compares EU actorness across five global governance policy areas: trade, digitalisation, health, human rights, and climate. Building on insights drawn from the ENSURED project and relevant academic literature, we construct an analytical framework to capture (1) internal and external actorness criteria, and (2) different types of EU support for specific global governance institutions. First, we find that the EU's actorness is not uniform, but rather takes various shades and operates at different levels, from moderate to high. While we see diverse factors enabling the EU's external action, we also highlight barriers to such action – both within and outside the EU's control. Second, overall, the EU is highly supportive of global governance across policy areas. We argue that it is worth differentiating various forms of EU support for global governance, including ideational (like policy innovation) and material support (including climate finance), as well as activities within formal institutions (such as the World Trade Organization) and beyond (e.g., bilateral partnerships).

Citation Recommendation

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Introduction

Ever since the European Union (EU) – and indeed its predecessors – emerged as an actor in the international arena, scholars have tried to capture its specific role as a unique supranational actor. Some of the concepts developed in this context have disappeared as quickly as they arrived, while others have survived the passage of time, seemingly oblivious to challenge and change. One of the most prominent examples is the concept of "actorness", which aims to grasp the extent to which the EU can be classified as an international actor (Drieskens 2017).

Various factors explain why actorness has become the classic concept with which to grasp the idea of the EU as an actor. Scholars have different views on what constitutes an international actor: some focus on internal coordination dynamics, while others prioritise external recognition or different aspects altogether (Drieskens 2021). Actorness is a *passe-partout* concept that allows observers to understand the EU's international functioning irrespective of competences, contexts, or circumstances. This adaptability allows the concept to accommodate the different identities that the EU claims (or fails) to assume. Actorness aims to measure the extent to which an entity is an international actor, and so its conceptual usefulness does not depend on that entity's high or unique performance. This is in contrast to frameworks that emphasise power, such as concepts of the EU as a normative power or a market power (Damro 2012; Manners 2002). Moreover, unlike most power concepts, actorness emphasises system-level variables and comparison. This is particularly relevant when we consider calls to decentre and decolonise the study of EU foreign policy (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013; Keukeleire and Lecocq 2018; Bouris et al. 2025; Bhambra 2022).

> To what extent is the EU an international actor in global governance?

Another reason why actorness has developed into such a conceptual workhorse is that it asks a highly relevant question: To what extent is the EU an international actor in global governance? This report answers that question in four steps. First, we provide a short history of actorness research. Second, we operationalise the term, with the aim of comparing EU actorness across five policy areas at the frontline of global governance: trade, digitalisation, health, human rights, and climate. Exploring dynamics across these different policy areas – including distinct global governance and intra-EU contestation and transformation dynamics – allows us to trace variations in the EU's approach to global governance. Third, we use ENSURED research insights from across the five policy areas (Fernández and Heinzel 2025a, 2025b; King and Pousadela 2025; Marconi and Greco 2025; Parizek and Weinhardt 2025; Petri and Karlas 2025; Weinhardt et al. 2025; Bursi and Greco 2025; Kustova et al. 2025; Peerboom et al. 2025) to map the EU's role in each area. We present these insights in two sections, differentiating (1) the enablers of and barriers to EU actorness, and (2) the extent of EU support for specific global governance institutions and its capacity to influence global governance accordingly. Fourth, we reflect on the overall insights drawn from this comparison and discuss the policy implications of different shades of actorness across various multilateral institutions.

A Short History of Actorness

We can trace the story of actorness through three distinct stages (Drieskens 2017). The 1970s mark the first defining moment in the subsequent five decades of research. As far as we know, Carol Ann Cosgrove and Kenneth J. Twitchett introduced the concept in 1970, when reflecting on the growing global importance of certain collective actors, such as the EU's predecessors and the United Nations (UN) (Cosgrove and Twitchett 1970). They listed three criteria for actorness, which have had a lasting impact on subsequent scholarship: autonomy (the level of decision-making autonomy held by an entity's central institutions), impact (the level at which an entity performs significant and continuing functions), and recognition (the role an entity plays in shaping [members'] foreign policies). Echoes of these criteria can be found, for instance, in Gunnar Sjöstedt's definition of "actor capacity," which many scholars still use to define actorness: "a measure of the autonomous unit's capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system" (Sjöstedt 1977, 16).

Actorness research experienced a second impetus during the 1990s, when various treaties granted the EU new powers and capacities. Researchers became interested in whether these institutional developments resulted in real-world change – that is, whether they increased the EU's actorness. Two actorness operationalisations from this context have significantly influenced the literature ever since. First, Joseph Jupille and James A. Caporaso defined "actor capacity" with reference to four criteria: (1) *de jure* or *de facto* recognition; (2) authority, meaning "the EU's legal competence in a given subject matter"; (3) autonomy, meaning the "institutional distinctiveness" of EU action; and (4) value, tactical, procedural, and output cohesion – the extent to which the EU is able to formulate common goals, strategies, and policies (Jupille and Caporaso 1998, 215–220). Second, Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler understood actorness through the lenses of presence (the ability to exert influence and shape perceptions of others), opportunity (the external context of ideas and events), and capability (internal EU policy processes) (Bretherton and Vogler 1999, 2006, 2013).

The third defining chapter of actorness research in the 2010s was characterised by increased emphasis on systematisation. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty and its foreign policy provisions gave new momentum to actorness research. Since then, the actorness concept has been applied to a variety of policy areas and international forums (Fernández 2025; Boogaerts 2018; Gehring et al. 2017; Groen and Niemann 2013; Huigens and Niemann 2011). We have also seen calls for and attempts at a more systematic use of the concept in the study of the EU. This includes comparative work on EU actorness across policy areas (Damro et al. 2018; Freire et al. 2022) as well as research that links actorness to other concepts and theories, such as effectiveness (Niemann and Bretherton 2013; TRIGGER 2019a). Another strand of the literature has reflected on whether the actorness concept is applicable beyond the EU (Brattberg and Rhinard 2013; Mattheis and Wunderlich 2017).

Certainly, there is still much work to be done in establishing the general theory of actorness envisaged by these early scholars. However, the way forward seems clear: researchers need to clarify the notion of actorness, namely what constitutes the ideal type of collective actor in international relations, and the variables that capture its occurrence and hence help to evaluate its extent (Drieskens 2017). In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge that EU actorness involves its relationship to both its members ("internal actorness") and the outside world ("external actorness") (TRIGGER 2019a; Kratochvíl et al. 2011). While scholars have heavily emphasised internal actorness factors, we highlight the need to move beyond an inside-out view on the EU's functioning in global governance and to consider outside-in perspectives (Petri 2024).

Comparing Actorness Across Policy Areas

This report builds on previous research efforts to theorise and operationalise actorness (such as TRIGGER 2019b; see also the previous section). To focus our analysis, we have selected those actorness dimensions that help us grasp the dynamics shaping the EU's capacity to influence global governance, specifically global governance transformation. We then implement a cross-case comparison in two steps.

First, we compare the presence or absence of internal and external actorness conditions across the five policy areas mentioned above (Petri 2024). We select seven conditions that correspond to well-known actorness criteria (such as cohesion and opportunity) and are relevant to understanding the EU's possible role in global governance transformation (such as internal competences and legal provisions to act within a specific institution). The differentiation of internal and external actorness conditions allows us to distinguish factors that are within the EU's control (e.g., forging unity among member states) as opposed to those beyond its control (e.g., external perceptions). We assume that the presence of enabling conditions can explain why the EU is able to play a more influential role in global governance. For example, higher EU competence (exclusive vs. shared or supporting competences; see Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Articles 3, 4, and 6) can enable the EU to act externally. In contrast, the absence of such conditions (for instance, negative external perceptions) would indicate internal and/or external barriers to such a role.

Table 1: Overview of Actorness Conditions (Adapted from Petri 2024, Table 1)

Internal Actorness	Availability of EU competences and instruments
	Coordination among EU and member states
	Willingness among member states for EU to act (on their behalf)
	Extent of common approach/unity among EU actors within a particular policy area
External Actorness	Availability of legal provisions and/or openness of multilateral institution
	Perceptions of EU's role by other international actors
	Opportunities for and/or interest of other international actors in EU action

Second, we compare the extent of the support that the EU provides to international institutions across the five policy areas. Such support can be ideational and material, and it can take place within the specific institutions

as well as beyond (see Petri 2024). This part of the analysis captures actorness not as explanatory factors, but compares the actual extent of EU action and influence across different fields of global governance.

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The following insights are based on the research presented under the umbrella of the ENSURED project. For this report, we consulted three types of sources. First, the results of a survey on perceptions of the two aspects mentioned above (enablers or barriers and support), which was completed by twelve ENSURED researchers for all policy areas (see the Annex).[1] While these twelve researchers are policy area experts, the sample is not large, and therefore we do not claim that these insights can be generalised. Second, we consulted the research outputs of the various ENSURED work packages (Fernández and Heinzel 2025a; King and Pousadela 2025; Marconi and Greco 2025; Parizek and Weinhardt 2025; Petri and Karlas 2025; Fernández and Heinzel 2025b; Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel 2025; Weinhardt, Parizek, and Srivastava 2025; Kustova et al. 2025; Bursi and Greco 2025). Third, we reviewed the relevant academic literature on EU action across forums, which offered various perspectives to complement the ENSURED research reports.

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1   The response rate varied across policy areas and ENSURED work packages. While we received multiple replies on climate, for example, other areas were only covered by one ENSURED researcher.

EU Actorness: Enablers and Barriers

Our survey asked ENSURED researchers to provide their assessments of the various EU actorness criteria (see Table 1 above) across the five main policy areas (trade, digitalisation, health, human rights, and climate).[2] Response options for each actorness criterion ranged from very low (1), low (2), and moderate (3), to high (4) and very high (5) (Annex, Q3). In cases where multiple answers were provided for the same policy area, we used the average value of all the assessments. Table 2 as well as Figures 1 and 2 show the results of the survey per policy area and actorness criteria.[3] This comparison leads to three overall findings.

Table 2: Survey Results – Evaluation of Enabling Actorness Criteria Across Policy Areas

	Available Competences and Instruments	Intra-EU Coordination	Member-State Willingness	Common Approach and Unity	Available Provisions	Positive External Perceptions	Opportunities and Interest
Trade	Very high	Very high	Very high	Very high	Very high	High	Very high
Digitalisation	High	Very high	Very high	Very high	High	Moderate	Moderate
Health	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Human rights	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	High
Climate	High	Very high	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	High

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2   To reduce complexity, we limited the analytical focus to specific forums and/or issues within each policy area. ENSURED research has covered diverse aspects within individual work packages (e.g., WTO dynamics and global taxation governance beyond the WTO). Combining these insights could have led to an oversimplification of the results. For example, we decided against merging insights on the EU's roles in biodiversity and climate governance, which are shaped by different internal and external dynamics. The specific forum or issue in focus is explained in each empirical sub-section (see below).

3   The choice of operationalisation and visualisation was based on previous research projects that have assessed actorness in a comparative way, namely the TRIGGER actorness model (TRIGGER 2019b, 2021).

First, the EU's actorness is stronger in some policy areas than others (see Figures 1 and 2). This confirms previous research, which finds that the extent of actorness varies across policy areas (Damro et al. 2018; TRIGGER 2019b, n.d.). While this variation might not be surprising per se, the nuances uncovered in our analysis demonstrate the analytical value of the actorness concept. The insights also show that the EU's ability to act in the international arena should not be taken for granted, nor should it be considered as a single factor, since diverse barriers and enabling factors shape the EU's role across policy areas.

Second, we find that impressions of the EU's ability to meet these actorness criteria are generally positive. It is noteworthy that across all policy areas, the EU was never ranked "very low" on any of the criteria. Thus, both internal and external conditions largely enable the EU's international activities. The clearest – and indeed only – identification of barriers (i.e., lower assessments) was in the health policy domain (see the blue line in Figure 1). These barriers – particularly the low score for available EU competences and instruments – are less surprising, as this is the only case in our comparison where the EU holds only supporting competences (see Figure 1).

The EU's ability to act in the international arena should not be taken for granted, nor should it be considered as a single factor.

Third, among the five policy areas, trade stands out with the highest level of actorness. Several factors explain this result, including the fact that member states have made extensive competence transfers to the EU, and the fact that the European Commission plays a leading role in the World Trade Organization (WTO), which other members of the organisation recognise (see below). It is noteworthy that only two other policy areas received "very high" scores for specific actorness criteria. In digitalisation, very high scores are particularly evident among EU internal factors. This suggests that while the EU enjoys a particularly enabling environment in which to set rules for new digital technologies internally, its attempts to do so are less welcome externally, as Europe currently lags behind the US and China in technology development. Intra-EU coordination received the highest score in climate, which reflects previous research findings on the "Team EU" approach in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Delreux and Keukeleire 2017).

The following sub-sections explore specific dynamics regarding enablers of and barriers to the EU's international activities across the five policy areas in more detail.

Figure 1: Comparison Among Areas of EU Exclusive vs. Supporting Competences

Trade ● Health
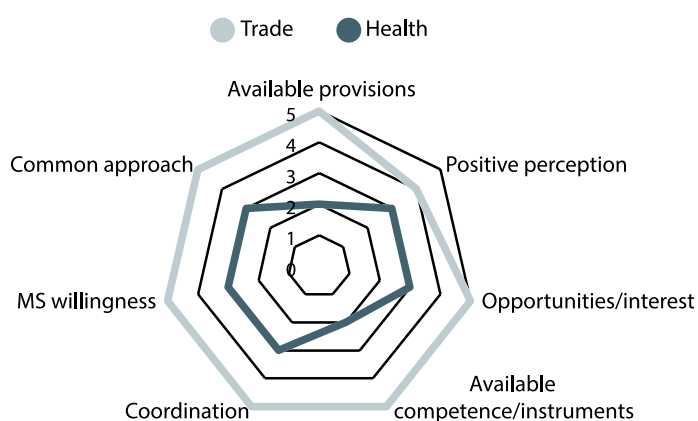
Source: Authors' own illustration based on survey results, ranking from 0 to 5 (low/high).

Figure 2: Comparison Within Areas of EU Shared Competences

Digitalisation ● Human Rights ● Climate
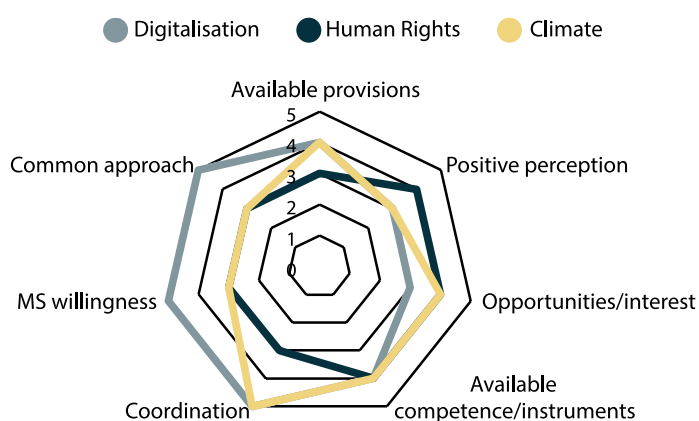
Source: Authors' own illustration based on survey results, ranking from 0 to 5 (low/high).

Trade

In assessing the EU's actorness in trade, both internal and external dimensions must be taken into account. Internally, the EU demonstrates a high degree of actorness owing to the exclusive competences conferred by its member states. These competences allow the Commission to represent the EU within the WTO, to negotiate agreements with third states, and to apply a range of export controls. Furthermore, the Commission has at its disposal an extensive toolbox for trade defence, from foreign direct investment (FDI) screening to the International Procurement Instrument and the recently introduced Anti-Coercion Instrument. This strong institutional foundation is reinforced by a high level of coordination between the Commission and EU member states, as well as by the latter's willingness to allow the EU to act on their behalf (Parizek and Weinhardt 2025). Common commercial policy further ensures coherence and unity among EU actors in the domain of international trade.

> Internally, the EU demonstrates a high degree of actorness in trade owing to the exclusive competences conferred by its member states.

Externally, the EU's actorness is equally visible. The WTO recognises the EU as a full member, even though member states formally retain their own membership. Following the internal competence allocation between the EU and its member states, however, the Commission serves as the main interlocutor for the WTO and its other members, both in trade liberalisation talks and in dispute settlement. In recent decades, the EU's external credibility has been bolstered by the generally positive perceptions of its role among international partners (in terms of both ideational and material support, both within and beyond the WTO)[4] and its decent track record

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4 See the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) – the EU's proposal to replace the blocked appellate mechanisms, which technically exists outside the WTO but is fully aligned with its rulebook.

in winning cases via the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism (Wouters and Hedge 2022; Bossuyt et al. 2020; De Ville 2018). As the long-standing representative of the European single market on the international stage, the Commission has developed substantial expertise, which other actors acknowledge and value. The opportunities and interests of third countries in engaging with the EU remain consistently high, which further underlines its capacity as a coherent and influential actor in global trade governance.

That said, many developing countries have criticised the EU's recent unilateral trade instruments on sustainability (especially the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism [CBAM] and the EU Deforestation Regulation), and some have considered filing a case against the EU at the WTO for alleged breach of multilateral trade rules. This has generally led to a less positive image of the EU among its international partners (Weinhardt et al. 2025).

The US has also been more critical of the EU's role in the WTO, particularly concerning its perception that the EU has not pushed hard enough for China to comply with trade regulations. US President Trump has recently exploited the hard security vulnerabilities of individual member states to undermine the EU's collective negotiating position, which has consequences for the international trade system as a whole (see the section below on support and influence across policy areas).

Digitalisation

As our survey results indicate, generally strong enabling conditions (such as very high intra-EU coordination, member-state willingness, and common approaches) mean that the digital realm is a policy area in which the EU exhibits high levels of internal and external actorness, thanks to the first-mover advantage it has enjoyed in many fields. The EU is one of the most active regulatory powers in the digital domain, developing an extensive body of legislation that spans digital markets, data governance, Artificial Intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, and critical digital infrastructure, both across member states (internal) and increasingly among partner countries (external). Such legislation and strategies can be categorised under three main digital policy pillars: (1) digital services, markets, and data protection; (2) AI and emerging technology; and (3) digital infrastructure, hardware, and supply chains. These laws and policies are coordinated by various Commission actors, including: the Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT), Directorate General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW), Directorate-General for Competition (DG COMP), and Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST). Despite numerous mandates, implementation has been relatively harmonious, supported by funding instruments such as the Digital Europe Programme and Horizon Europe.

Its low level of digital sovereignty is a barrier to the EU's internal actorness in the digital realm.

While its low level of digital sovereignty is a barrier to the EU's internal actorness in the digital realm – given its infrastructural dependencies – security concerns over "digital sovereignty" nevertheless unite member states beyond their industrial priorities and thus act as an enabler. Digital sovereignty is a concern because more than 80 percent of Europe's digital technologies

and infrastructures are imported (Bria et al. 2025). As such, our survey participants assessed external perceptions and opportunities as moderate, but it is worth noting that some of the above-mentioned dependencies in terms of hard infrastructure can only be reduced via international partnerships, which have recently been streamlined under the International Digital Strategy (Ricart and Senczyszyn 2025). However, when it comes to AI, Europe still maintains its competitive advantage, thanks to its innovative system. This leads to both internal cohesion and a willingness among international regulatory bodies to follow developments in Europe.

However, when it comes to AI, Europe still maintains its competitive advantage, thanks to its innovative system.

The best-practice examples of EU external actorness in the digital domain are the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and cryptocurrency regulation. The EU formalised its data protection regime in the early 2000s, and thanks to its market size, those entities that wanted to continue to trade with Europe have harmonised their data protection laws with EU regulations (Ergenc et al. 2025). As for cryptocurrency regulation, the EU's efforts to advance multilateral initiatives to formalise global norms stand in contrast to the recent US withdrawal from such standardisation efforts (Bursi and Greco 2025). In addition, initiatives such as the Digital Euro increase internal cohesion and contribute to the EU's actorness in this domain.

Health

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the EU's actorness in health scored low to moderate in our survey. Based on insights drawn from ENSURED reports and the academic literature on the EU's role in global health governance (Fernández 2024, 2025; Fernández and Heinzel 2025a, 2025b; Rollet and Chang 2013; Battams et al. 2014; Bergner 2023), we find some enablers in this context, but also diverse barriers to EU external action on health.

In terms of barriers, our analysis highlights three factors: two internal and one external. First, the EU's internal competence to act is relatively low, as health encompasses supportive and shared competences, and the EU has been acting on "relatively narrow mandates" in the health sector (Fernández 2025). Second, member states' willingness for the EU to act in this arena has been limited, as has the extent of coordination and a common approach. Susan Bergner (2023) argues that the actions of EU member states have been shaped by "different agendas," and that member states do not see the "added value of the EU in global health" outside the World Health Organization (WHO). The negotiations surrounding the Pandemic Agreement are a particularly noteworthy case, as member states originally agreed to give the EU a mandate to negotiate, but these negotiations subsequently caused "dissatisfaction" among some member states, and the final vote revealed a lack of cohesion among members (Fernández and Heinzel 2025b). Third, the negative perceptions of other international actors, including those from the Global South, constitute an important external barrier. Reflecting on the shadow cast by the COVID-19 pandemic, Susan Bergner (2023) cites continued critiques of the EU's perceived "vaccine nationalism." In a similar vein, Óscar Fernández and Mirko Heinzel

(2025b) note the lack of trust in the EU on the part of Global South actors in particular, including "resentment over the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic." In the case of the Pandemic Agreement negotiations, the fact that some actors may have perceived the EU's negotiation approach as "patronising and dismissive" (Fernández and Heinzel 2025b) can be seen as a particularly negative indicator for EU actorness.

> Some actors may have perceived the EU's negotiation approach as "patronising and dismissive."

Despite this relatively negative assessment, three factors enable EU action in global health governance. Internally, while acknowledging its limited internal competences according to the EU treaties, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the EU's external health ambitions, as solidified in the 2022 Global Health Strategy (Fernández 2025). Externally, while the EU only holds observer status at the WHO, the Commission has nevertheless played a "prominent role in WHO-sponsored negotiations," also in terms of its voting rights and its membership on the Pandemic Fund's governing board (Fernández 2025). In addition, various analyses describe the COVID-19 pandemic and the US retreat from multilateral politics as an opportunity context in which external attention to EU activities has increased (Bergner 2023; Fernández and Heinzel 2025b). In sum, while significant barriers exist, the "EU has consolidated itself as a global health actor after COVID-19" (Fernández 2025).

Human Rights

In our survey, respondents rated the EU's promotion of human rights in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) as moderate to high in terms of actorness criteria. Academic research dedicated to EU (and member-state) action in the UNHRC context provides further nuance on the EU's evolved capacity to act in the Council (Tuominen 2023, 2024, 2025; King and Pousadela 2025; Smith 2010, 2017).

Starting with the internal actorness criteria, two dynamics stand out. First, looking at the EU's competences and instruments, Karen E. Smith (2010) argued that the EU lacked an overall strategy for its (external) human rights policy. Since then, however, this strategic basis has been strengthened by the 2020 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, as well as other policy documents (Council of the EU 2025; Consilium n.d.; EEAS 2020). Second, relations between member states' individual and EU-centralised activities are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, there is evidence that the EU and its member states have intensified coordination, following a "one message with many voices" strategy. Moreover, the EU Delegation in Geneva has made extensive efforts in arranging intra-EU meetings, widening debates with stakeholders, and delivering statements during negotiations (Tuominen 2023). On the other hand, studies have found that member states rather promote their own initiatives and priorities, and that intra-EU disagreements lead the EU to take less ambitious positions (such as on migration) and member states to take divergent positions when voting (with Hungary as one example) (Tuominen 2023, 2024; King and Pousadela 2025; Smith 2010, 2017). In this context, we also note

increased activities on the part of certain regional groupings, such as the Nordic–Baltic Eight, which take complementary action alongside the EU (Tuominen 2025).

Moving to the external actorness criteria, we focus on three aspects. First, the UNHRC's limited openness to the EU explains the above-mentioned parallel efforts on the part of EU Delegation representatives and member states. The EU has enhanced observer status in the UNHRC, meaning it has the right to speak and deliver statements, but it cannot vote – in contrast to the 7–9 EU member states who are full members of the UNHRC (depending on the membership cycle). Thus, European voices constitute a minority of the 47 total UNHRC members, which constrains the potential for EU leadership (Tuominen 2023, 2024). Second, external perceptions of the EU are ambiguous. The EU is seen as an active negotiator with high ideational resources and discursive power – not just in formal negotiations, but also in side events and consultations (Tuominen 2024; King and Pousadela 2025). This gives the EU significant clout in its activities. At the same time, other actors have also criticised the EU for its inconsistency and for applying double standards, for example in its comparative silence on certain policy areas (such as migration) or its failure to acknowledge various human rights violations committed in its colonial past (King and Pousadela 2025; Tuominen 2024). In addition, the EU is at times seen as an inflexible negotiator (Tuominen 2023). Third, in terms of external opportunity context, the EU takes an active stance on almost every aspect of the UNHRC agenda (Tuominen 2023) and formulates priorities on diverse issues and for various regions (Council of the EU 2025). Reflecting on the wider actor constellation within the UNHRC, however, EU messages are often contested by China and Russia, as well as developing countries (Tuominen 2023; Smith 2010).

The EU is seen as an active negotiator with high ideational resources and discursive power in the UNHRC.

Climate

Our survey results are in line with academic findings of moderate-to-high degrees of EU actorness in the international climate arena, and within the UNFCCC specifically (Oberthür and Groen 2018; Groen and Niemann 2013; Groenleer and Van Schaik 2007).

In terms of enabling factors, the EU's external action on climate displays various internal and external strengths. Internally, while climate is formally a shared competence, the EU has taken significant policy steps towards an ambitious climate agenda (examples include the European Green Deal and the Emissions Trading System). As such, the EU's internal policies are the basis for its "exemplary leadership" externally (Wurzel et al. 2017). Furthermore, the EU has built an advanced coordination system to manage climate negotiations through the so-called "EU Team" (Earsom and Delreux 2023; Delreux and Keukeleire 2017). Moving to the external actorness conditions, the EU is a highly recognised actor in the UNFCCC: as a Regional Economic Integration Organisation, it is a full member of the UNFCCC process and a party to the Paris Agreement. Additionally, between 2008 and 2015, other international actors perceived the EU as one

of the top three actors influencing these negotiations (Parker et al. 2017). At the same time, our survey participants rated "positive perceptions" only moderately, which shows that an actor's influential role might not always translate into a positive reputation. Nevertheless, the external opportunity context for EU action is still favourable, given high expectations of the EU as a major climate-finance donor and a "leadiator" in negotiations, as well as the gaps left by the US' shift away from ambitious climate policies in 2025 (Ettinger and Collins 2023; Kustova et al. 2025; Bäckstrand and Elgström 2013; Petri and Karlas 2025).

In 2025, the EU's 2040 reduction target has been highly contested, which has delayed its commitment to the international process.

At the same time, we should also recognise three barrier factors. First, while the EU's coordination in the UNFCCC is high, the coordination resources this requires (in terms of time and personnel, among other factors) are significant. Furthermore, intra-EU compartmentalisation can slow down and/or complicate the EU's outreach in the wider climate regime complex (Delreux and Earsom 2024). Second, exemplary leadership ambition must be matched by ongoing policy ambition and implementation. In the past, the EU has struggled to determine joint emissions reduction targets (Groen and Niemann 2013). In 2025, its 2040 reduction target has been highly contested, which has delayed its commitment to the international process (Weise and Guillot 2025). In addition, sectoral policies on emissions reduction – such as deciding whether to phase out coal – differ significantly among member states (Beyond Fossil Fuels 2025). Third, in terms of external perceptions and opportunity context, some observers see the EU's importance in international climate politics decreasing, considering its lower share of current global emissions and the comparative attention paid to major emitters such as China and the US, as two relevant examples.

EU Actorness: Support and Influence

To assess the extent of EU support for global governance and its perceived influence, we implemented two steps. We first asked researchers to assess the different types of EU support (ideational or material, and within or beyond specific institutions) using a scale from very low (1), low, or moderate to high or very high (5) (Annex, Q7). We then asked them to assess the EU's perceived influence across policy areas on a scale of 0–10 and subsequently compared their assessments (Annex, Q10).

Looking at types of support, we see that our survey participants assessed support across policy areas and types as relatively high (Table 3). This shows that the EU makes considerable efforts across all policy areas – which does not necessarily correspond to success or influence, but rather describes the extent of its activities. At the same time, we find differences across the five policy areas: survey respondents rated EU support highest in trade (4.75), compared to the lowest support ratings in health and human rights (3.5). We can link this to the lower scores on diverse actorness criteria in both of these policy areas. In terms of variance in types of support across policy areas, we cannot identify a clear pattern, which shows that EU support takes diverse forms. Overall, the researchers scored ideational support and support beyond the institution slightly higher than other types of support. This indicates that the EU's ideas, policy innovations, and leadership proposals play a more significant role overall than material support. This is not to say that material support is not also important, as EU contributions to climate finance matter significantly in the climate arena, for example. However, the EU presents a strong image of ideational leadership – such as leadership by example in making ambitious emissions reductions – in the international arena.

Table 3: Support Strength Across Policy Areas

	Ideational	Material	Within the Institution	Beyond the Institution	Average
Trade	5	4.5	5	4.5	4.75
Digitalisation	4.75	4.25	4.25	4.75	4.5
Health	3.5	3.5	3	4	3.5
Human rights	4	3	3.5	3.5	3.5
Climate	4.25	4.29	4.165	4.375	4.27
Average	4.3	3.908	3.983	4.225	4.104

When asked to assess the EU's ability to exert influence on global governance via different support activities (Annex, Q10), we found that respondents gave fairly optimistic assessments (7.452 of 10; see Figure 3).[5] However, we also find notable differences among the five policy areas. Somewhat unsurprisingly, EU influence in trade scored highest, while influence in climate scored lowest: this speaks to relevant trends in global climate politics, in which other major powers – most notably the US and China – play a considerable role (Petri and Karlas 2025). Our respondents rated the other three policy areas (digitalisation, human rights, and health) in the medium-to-high range. The relatively high score in health is particularly noteworthy, considering the lower actorness scores in this policy area.

Figure 3: Perceived EU Influence Across Global Governance Institutions/Policy Areas
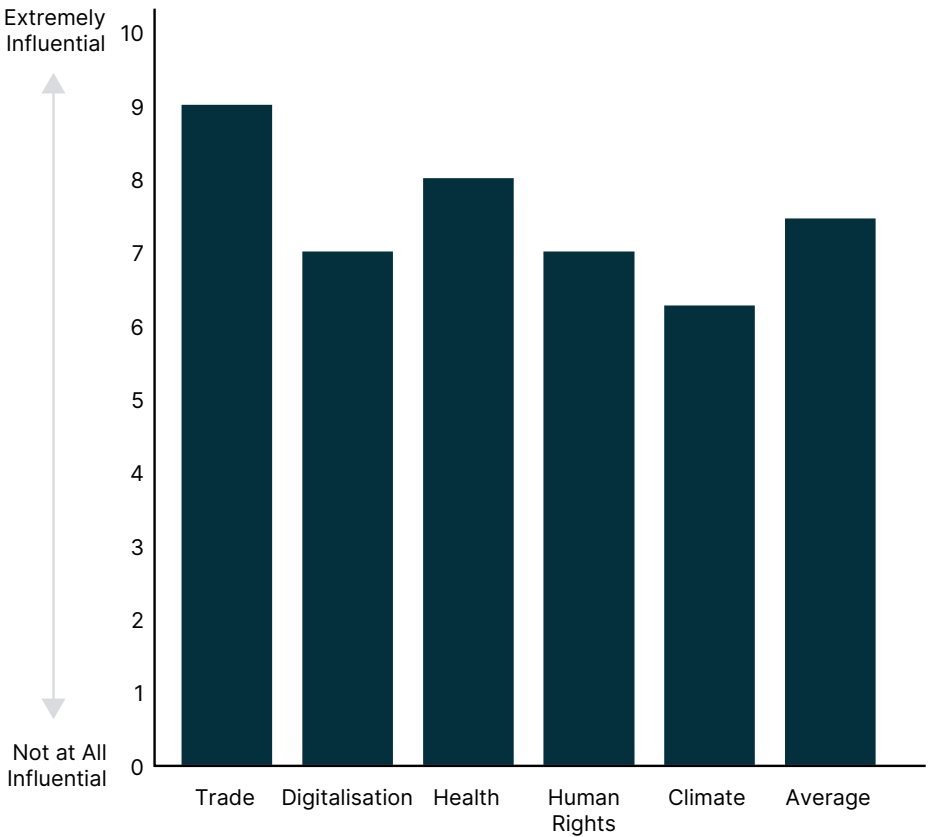
The following sections explore individual dynamics across these five policy areas.

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5   For those policy areas with multiple respondents, we found small disagreements among them (digitalisation scored 6 and 8; sustainability scored 6, 6, 6, and 7).

Trade

EU support for global trade governance – both within the WTO and beyond, as well as at the ideational and the material level – is generally high. This is largely thanks to the trust earned by the European Commission over long years of consistently implementing its mandate and supporting the WTO, including in policy innovation and thought leadership. Generally speaking, the Commission's role in the WTO is not contested by EU member states – not even informally. The exception is perhaps the Commission's perceived pushiness in pursuing climate and environmental goals in the WTO context, and relatedly its perceived lack of sensitivity to other WTO members' interests (Parizek and Weinhardt 2025). That said, member states have recently become more sensitive to the Commission's role in the field of trade.

EU support for global trade governance – both within the WTO and beyond – is generally high.

For the past 30 years, students of the EU's role in the world have been taught to believe that EU actorness is most powerful or most robust in the domain of trade. Endowed with exclusive competences to conduct common commercial policy, the weight of the single market (completed in 1993) in the world economy gave the EU formidable power to enforce not only international trade rules via the dispute settlement procedures at the WTO, but also to set its own rules that apply globally – the much-touted "Brussels effect" (Bradford 2020). Even though the WTO's trade liberalisation agenda ran into roadblocks at the Doha Round, the EU gained clout in bi- and plurilateral negotiations by widening its membership and deepening its integration.

This golden era of "market power Europe" (Damro 2012) has gradually come to an end since the 2007 global economic crisis, which – although it started in the US – hit Europe the hardest. It took the shine off the eurozone and led to "negative growth" across much of the EU. As the single market diminished, other economies emerged – primarily China. Years of austerity measures hollowed out the EU's industrial and technological base, to the point where several of the Commission's staff working documents warned of strategic dependencies and critical vulnerabilities in the supply of raw materials and chemical compounds from other states (e.g., European Commission 2021). In an increasingly complex and conflictual world, concerns were growing that the EU had become dangerously dependent on transatlantic trade and trade with China. Calls for more European "strategic autonomy" (Gehrke 2022) led the EU to take a "unilateral turn" (Verellen and Hofer 2023) in the context of an increasingly lawless global trade regime, in which the WTO's second pillar (dispute settlement) had been disabled by successive US administrations faced with systematic non-compliance on the part of China and Russia. In response to the first Trump administration's threats to impose crippling tariffs on European steel and aluminium, the EU equipped itself with several trade defence instruments, ranging from an International Procurement Instrument to an Anti-Coercion Instrument. None of these were ready to deploy when the second Trump administration sought to effectively scrap the Bretton Woods rulebook to establish the "Turnberry system" (Greer 2025), named after Trump's golf resort in Scotland, where a bilateral summit with the EU took place in July 2025. There the Commission – in close coordination with the EU's most powerful economies – supinely

agreed to a 15 percent tariff mark-up on its exports to the US (among other things), in return for the hope of averting a transatlantic trade war and securing ongoing American military protection against an aggressive Russia.

> Trump has exposed the inability of the EU and its member states to mount a democratic defence of the WTO's legitimacy.

While the EU remains influential in its support for the WTO and open, rules-based trade (in part due to its large network of WTO-compatible free trade agreements), it has also faced criticism for its apparent collusion in its own subjugation to Trump's mafia-like extortion – "Europe's 'happy vassal' complex" (Gressani 2025) – which prolonged the quest for European strategic autonomy in trade and security, and pitted the EU more squarely against China. Trump has undermined what was previously considered to be the EU's key strength – the single market – by revealing political weaknesses within the economic powerhouse, which has seemingly been unwilling and unable to engage in a power struggle to defend its interests or to articulate a coherent set of strategic priorities. Trump has also exposed the inability of the EU and its member states to mount a democratic defence of the WTO's legitimacy. Although the Commission has repackaged capitulation as pragmatism, this nevertheless amounts to the rejection of any substantial autonomy and the failure to defend international multilateralism in exchange for American protection of EU member states and war-torn Ukraine, as well as perceived gains linked to the hope of averting a further escalation in trade tensions. If one of the world's largest single markets and some of its most developed countries tell themselves that resistance to Trump's bullying is futile, then who is left to act in defence of the Bretton Woods system (de Vos 2025)?

The Turnberry Summit constitutes a threat to the WTO, although nothing about it is inevitable. Going forward, the EU's actions (or lack thereof) in implementing the lopsided transatlantic "agreement" could still shape the outcome of Trump's quest to turn the WTO system into a vast geopolitical space. As the survey results (see Figure 3 above) suggest, while the Turnberry moment raises doubts, the EU has the potential to be an influential actor in trade governance.

Digitalisation

The EU's capacity to shape international standards and norms in the fast-developing digital technology domain is influenced by two opposing forces: its ideational cohesion, both within and beyond its borders; and its lack of material power, again both within and beyond its borders. The EU's commitments to rules-based international order and free markets, and its track record of promoting and adhering to international regulatory regimes based on these principles, make it a strong and reliable actor in multilateral organisations. Our survey results confirm that support for digitalisation is strong across all dimensions – ideational, material, internal, and external – resulting in a relatively high overall average score of 4.5.

However, as Europe has fallen behind in technology development and manufacturing, its capacity to shape standards in emerging technologies has diminished. Digital trade negotiations that include efforts to achieve

mutual formal recognition of e-identities are a case in point. Similarly, the Digital Markets Act has largely been emulated by the UK and the Customs Union countries, but not necessarily by the EU's Asian digital partners, who have developed their own legislation and seek harmonisation rather than emulation.

In contrast to this lack of material capacity to shape international norms and standards beyond its borders, the EU's AI Act has been better received, thanks to its ideational strength both within and beyond its borders. Different actors advocate different approaches to AI governance, such as the market-based decentralised approach advanced by the US, the state-led centralised AI governance advocated by China, and the risk-based variegated approach endorsed by the EU. The AI Act empowers DG CONNECT and designated agencies at the member-state level to decide on specific regulations applicable to diverse AI technologies, especially given the ever-expanding nature of these AI-related technologies. In fact, the EU's flexible approach allows it to adapt an "experimental governance" pathway to AI; to reconcile with tech superpowers such as the US and China, who are far ahead of Europe in the AI domain; and to address emerging issues such as "sovereign AI" (Crum 2025).

As Europe has fallen behind in technology development and manufacturing, its capacity to shape standards in emerging technologies has diminished.

The EU has played a similarly successful mediatory role in the cyberspace governance debates at the UN. The Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG), led by Russia, has challenged the multilateralism of the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE), claiming the latter is inherently hierarchical and reinforces Western hegemony in the international order. Many Global South countries supported OEWG's state-centric approach, while the EU managed to mobilise China and several middle powers to continue the debate by supporting the Programme of Action instead of choosing sides (Marconi and Greco 2025).

These examples demonstrate that, due to the EU's less competitive industrial capacity, the Brussels effect is evolving from a leading position in norm-setting to one that requires capacity for horizontal mediation. However, the EU's long-standing normative actorness continues to reinforce its central role in horizontal negotiations in multilateral settings.

Health

Overall, our respondents ranked EU support in health medium to high, which is nevertheless lower than in other policy areas (3.5 of 5; see Table 3). As such, it is worth differentiating the types of support the EU provides for global health governance, including in the WHO or WHO-related negotiations and beyond.

When it comes to material support, the EU provides significant financial support to the WHO and to financial mechanisms beyond the organisation (Battams et al. 2014). The EU was among the top five contributors to the WHO's budget in 2022/2023 (WHO n.d.). Furthermore, the EU and its member states are the largest contributors to the Pandemic Fund

established under the World Bank in 2022 (Fernández and Heinzel 2025b; Pandemic Fund n.d.). Considering the ongoing debates on UN budget cuts and the questions around future US contributions to WHO budgets (and other budgets as well), the EU's role in providing such material support could continue to grow.

The EU's ideational support for global health governance is also evident both within and beyond the WHO. Fernández and Heinzel (2025b) find that the EU played a leading role in the WHO negotiations on a Pandemic Agreement. Similarly, Samantha Battams, Louise G. van Schaik, and Remco van de Pas (2014) note the EU's "pro-active role" in certain health-related initiatives, including debates surrounding WHO reform in the 2000s and 2010s. Beyond the WHO, the EU has actively promoted health policies in related yet distinct global governance institutions. Examples include the EU's health-related activities within the WTO (EU Delegation Geneva 2022; Fernández and Heinzel 2025a) and its emphasis on human health concerns in the UNFCCC context (Council of the EU 2024).

> The EU has "consolidated itself as an actor with great impact in global health."

In terms of the EU's influence, our respondents' overall assessment is high (8 of 10; see Figure 3). As Fernández and Heinzel (2025b) conclude, the EU has "consolidated itself as an actor with great impact in global health." This is somewhat surprising, considering the low-to-moderate findings on actorness conditions in this policy area. This shows that different types of support may be crucial in balancing out certain structural weaknesses.

Human Rights

Our survey respondents likewise ranked the EU's support for human rights promotion in the UNHRC medium to high, and lower than in other policy areas (3.5 of 5; see Table 3).

The European Commission and EU member states provide material support to the UNHRC by means of financial contributions to the UN, which includes funding support for poorer countries to participate in UNHRC meetings, among other things (Tuominen 2023). Outside the UNHRC, the EU promotes human rights via development finance, its sanctions policy, and observer missions, among other activities (Consilium n.d.). Respondents also perceive the EU's level of ideational support for the UNHRC process as high – our survey even ranked these types of support higher than material support. Within the UNHRC, the EU promotes human rights by means of concrete statements and proposals; organising side events, debates, and stakeholder consultations; publishing negotiation priorities ahead of UNHRC sessions; and making numerous recommendations during the Universal Period Review (Tuominen 2023). In these contexts, the EU regularly reiterates its strong commitment to the UN process and the importance of human rights (Consilium n.d.; Council of the EU 2025). These latter principles are also key to the EU's human rights promotion beyond the UNHRC, including in other UN forums (such

> Respondents perceive the EU's level of ideational support for the UNHRC process and beyond as high.

as the United Nations General Assembly) and bilateral outreach formats (such as human rights dialogues). As we discussed above, however, high support does not automatically translate into influence, either within the UNHRC or in wider global human rights governance.

Our respondents rated the EU's influence in the UN Human Rights Council 7 out of a possible 10 (see Figure 3). In a similar vein, Hanna Tuominen (2023) considers the EU a "rather effective" and "prominent" actor, without which "the HRC's outcomes would be very different." Samuel King and Inés M. Pousadela (2025) likewise emphasise the EU's active support, yet they also note constraints on EU influence, such as other actors holding the majority of votes and negative perceptions among certain actors, which limit the EU's credibility.

Climate

Our survey results rank the EU's support for global climate governance relatively high (4.27 of 5; see Table 3), yet our respondents identified a mismatch between efforts and impact, as they did not perceive a high level of EU influence on the climate domain (6.26 of 10; see Figure 3). In this policy area, the parallel efforts within the UNFCCC and beyond are particularly noteworthy, and we will discuss these in more detail below.

Within the UNFCCC, the EU is seen as an active negotiator thanks to its leadiator strategy; its coalition-building efforts, including the High Ambition Coalition; and its active contributions to UNFCCC calls for (written) submissions, among other factors (Bäckstrand and Elgström 2013; Oberthür and Groen 2017; Earsom 2023). The EU and its member states also provide financial support to the UNFCCC's various funds, with Germany playing a particular role as the host of the UNFCCC Secretariat in Bonn (the "Bonn Fund"). Despite this active role, the EU's ability to influence the UNFCCC might still be limited if we consider wider actor constellations and the importance of major emitters, such as China and the US.

> Despite its active role, the EU's ability to influence the UNFCCC might still be limited if we consider wider actor constellations and the importance of major emitters, such as China and the US.

Outside the UNFCCC, the EU promotes ambitious climate policies by means of domestic policies (see the exemplary leadership debate above) and outreach to other partners and partner regions. This includes promoting commitment to the Paris Agreement via trade agreements (Bertram and Van Coppenolle 2024) and Green Partnership agreements, among other mechanisms. Furthermore, EU Delegations around the globe have helped the EU to implement ambitious bilateral climate diplomacy (Biedenkopf and Petri 2019). In addition, the EU pursues efforts to mobilise finance for climate ambition beyond the UNFCCC, for example through the choice of projects for the Commission's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – Global Europe (DG Clima n.d.).

Conclusion: Managing and Harnessing Different Shades of Actorness

This report has explored the extent to which the EU qualifies as an international actor in diverse global governance forums. To answer this question, we compared the EU's internal and external actorness as well as the extent of its support and influence across five areas of global governance: trade, digitalisation, health, human rights, and climate. Our analysis reveals two relevant findings for future analysis of the EU's actorness in global governance and for EU policymaking in this context.

> The EU's actorness comes in various shades, with stronger actorness in some policy areas (such as trade) than in others (such as health).

First, the analysis confirmed that the EU's actorness comes in various shades, with stronger actorness in some policy areas (such as trade) than in others (such as health). Overall, the results were relatively positive, suggesting favourable conditions for EU external action. The analysis also demonstrated that certain conditions carry different weight across policy areas. For example, member states' willingness to work through EU channels varies significantly, as does the availability of a common approach at both formal and informal levels. We also see clear cases of external opportunity context shaping EU actorness, such as the COVID-19 pandemic giving impetus to more EU action on health (despite its theoretically weaker competences in this area). The second Trump administration is another relevant contextual factor, as it creates opportunities for EU action in some cases (such as health) but puts pressure on EU action in others (such as trade). EU policymakers should thus focus on diverse enablers at both internal and external levels. While pursuing formal recognition in a forum and/or autonomy in a policy area can be a relevant factor in enabling action, these factors alone will not suffice for the EU to play a role in global governance. In addition, the EU needs to accept that certain factors (such as the US presidency's behaviour) remain outside its control.

Second, while EU support for global governance is relatively high across all five policy areas, we found room for further nuance. Our respondents considered EU support for trade particularly high, whereas they ranked support in the domains of health and human rights comparatively low. At the same time, our results also emphasise that high levels of support do not necessarily correspond to high levels of influence. Furthermore, we find it worthwhile to differentiate forms of EU support for global governance, including ideational (such as policy innovation) and material support (such as climate finance), as well as activities within and beyond formal institutions (covering activities within the WHO or the UNFCCC and beyond, including bilateral partnerships). Formal action within specific institutions is just one dimension of the EU's support for global governance.

As such, the EU needs to consider using different tools to make the most of its capacity to act, in order to shape global governance and promote its interests.

In sum, we argue that understanding the different internal and external actorness conditions that shape the EU's role in diverse international institutions is crucial, as is distinguishing different ways in which the EU supports more effective, democratic, and robust global governance. While actorness can be a condition for external action, the EU can find diverse ways to support global governance – even when some conditions are unfavourable.

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Annex: Survey

Selection of Issue Area

1. Which issue area (or ENSURED WP) have you been doing research on and will you answer questions in this survey on? *

○ Trade (WP3)

○ Sustainability (WP4)

○ Health (WP5)

○ Human Rights (WP6)

○ Digital (WP7)

○ Other

2. In some work packages, there are various issue areas at stake. If this is the case for your research, can you specify which policy area you are relating to here? (e.g., WP4/sustainability = climate or biodiversity)

Enter your answer

Enablers and Barriers to EU Actorness

In this section we want to understand how you perceive the key enablers and barriers to EU action in your specific policy area.

3. How would you rank the following indicators about the EU's role in your specific institution (e.g., WTO, UNFCCC, WHO)? *

	Very Low	Low	Mod-erate	High	Very High	Don't know or n/a
Available provisions within the institution that allow EU to play a role	○	○	○	○	○	○
Positive perceptions of EU by other actors within institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Opportunities and interest of other international actors for EU to act within institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Available EU competences and internal instruments to act in the policy area	○	○	○	○	○	○
Coordination among EU and Member States within institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
EU Member States willingness for EU to act (on their behalf) within institution	○	○	○	○	○	○
Extent of common approach (or unity on ideas) among EU actors within policy area	○	○	○	○	○	○

* Mandatory

4. Could you give one or two examples of cases in which one or some of the above factors played an important *enabling* role for the EU in your policy area/institution? (e.g., specific coalition of countries asking for EU to act, EU Member States giving up speaking rights) *

Enter your answer

5. Could you give one or two examples of cases in which the above factors played an important *negative* role for the EU in your policy area/institution? (e.g. strong disagreements among EU MS, specific actor contesting the EU to have a seat at the table of an institution) *

Enter your answer

6. Do you have any other comments or thoughts that you would like to add? (e.g., something missing from the above list/table)

Enter your answer

The EU's Support to Multilateral Institutions and Influence

In this section, we want to understand how you assess the EU's support to specific institutions and the extent to which it exerts influence in the specific issue area.

7. How do you see the EU's support towards your specific multilateral institution (e.g., UNFCCC) and developments in the policy area (e.g., wider climate regime complex)? *

	Very Low	Low	Mod-erate	High	Very High	Don't know or n/a
Ideational support to the institution (e.g., voting, innovative proposals, coalitions)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Material support to the institution (e.g., formal membership, budget, staff)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Ideational support beyond the institution (e.g., unilateral action that supports policy developments, bilateral policy initiatives)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Material support beyond the institution (e.g., trade or other agreements, use of market power)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

* Mandatory

8. Which of these types of support does the EU show the most/least? Please rank the four types. *

Ideational support within institution

Ideational support beyond institution

Material support within institution

Material support beyond institution

9. Can you add a few thoughts (bullet points, full sentences, etc.) that justify your choice? This could be examples of specific/strong support activities or moments where the EU showed a lack of support. *

Enter your answer

10. Do you think that the EU is able to exert influence through these support activities on developments within the institution/wider policy area? *

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Not influential at all   Extremely influential

11. Do you have any additional thoughts on the question of EU support to institutions?

Enter your answer

Thank You!

Many thanks for taking the time to fill in the survey. If you have additional thougts on this topic, feel free to contact theKU Leuven (climate/health/ human rights) and CEPS (trade/digitalisation) teams!

12. Any other thoughts that you would like to share

Enter your answer

About ENSURED

In an era marked by global challenges, international cooperation is more essential than ever. Yet multilateral initiatives too often end in gridlock, as dominant states seek to bend the global order to their own interests. Enter ENSURED, a Horizon Europe-funded research consortium studying how the EU and its member states can better defend multilateralism and make global governance more robust, effective, and democratic.

ENSURED focuses on key policy domains that by their very nature pose complex transnational challenges. Our research assesses the state of play in these different areas and investigates the EU's strengths and weaknesses as an actor working to defend and transform multilateralism. Embracing the ethos of multilateral cooperation, the ENSURED consortium comprises universities, think tanks, and civil society groups from across Europe, Brazil, India, South Africa, China, and the United States. We aim to equip policymakers in the EU with evidence-based insights, actionable recommendations, and practical tools to promote better global governance for a world in transition.

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Edited by: Dr Alissa Jones Nelson
Editorial coordination: Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi)

Reinhardtstr. 7
10117 Berlin
Germany
ensured@gppi.net